

Reducing Bullying Boosts Employee Engagement and Performance: A Study Among Employees at the Sarawak Public Works Department

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is becoming a widely recognised issue that can harm employee welfare and organisational efficiency, particularly in the public sector. This study examines the relationship between workplace bullying, employee engagement, and job performance among Sarawak Public Works Department support group staff. We distributed a standard questionnaire electronically and received 504 responses (258 females and 246 males). The study found a significant negative correlation between workplace bullying, employee engagement ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.01$), and job performance ($r = -0.50$, $p < 0.01$). These findings highlight the importance of strong anti-bullying policies and employee engagement activities in public sector organisations, as these strategies are critical for improving job performance and organisational efficacy. The study emphasises that a supportive workplace reduces the adverse effects of bullying and positively increases individuals' ability to contribute to organisational goals. To summarise, public sector managers and legislators must prioritise workplace bullying prevention and involvement. Organisations can foster a resilient workplace culture by emphasising these characteristics, improving employee well-being, and achieving organisational outcomes. Future research should better examine the long-term effects of bullying treatment and engagement activities to understand effective management strategies in public sector environments.

Keywords: Workplace bullying, Employee engagement, Job performance, Public sector

INTRODUCTION

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The recognition of workplace bullying as a serious issue that impacts employee morale and organisational performance is growing. It is particularly noticeable in public-sector settings where service delivery efficiency is essential. This paper investigates the relationship between workplace bullying, employee engagement, and job performance among Sarawak's Public Works Department support staff.

Workplace bullying is a growing concern in Malaysia's public service sector. Abdul Rahman et al. (2018) investigated the prevalence of workplace bullying among Malaysia's public officials. The findings revealed that 43.1% of the participants had

experienced workplace bullying. These findings highlight the gravity of the problem in the Malaysian public service sector. Workplace bullying has a significant impact on job engagement and performance. Multiple academic studies have consistently shown that workplace bullying reduces employee engagement and job performance. Einarsen et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 120 studies and found a significant inverse relationship between workplace bullying and job performance. The authors discovered that workplace bullying impairs employees' ability to complete assigned tasks and contributes to the organisation's overall functioning.

There has been limited research on workplace bullying in the public sector, particularly in Malaysia. Understanding the prevalence and impact of bullying in this particular setting is critical for developing effective strategies to combat the problem. The consequences of workplace bullying are especially severe in the public sector due to the unique structures and cultures that exist within governmental organisations. Employees may face barriers to reporting bullying, which may exacerbate the problem and reduce organisational effectiveness (Tuckey & Scott, 2014). Engagement levels in the public sector frequently depend on the organisational climate, so it is critical to address bullying proactively to foster an environment conducive to employee commitment and performance. This study seeks to fill a gap in existing research by investigating the impact of workplace bullying on job engagement and performance within a public sector context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workforce Bullying

A growing body of research has identified the negative consequences of workplace bullying, such as decreased job satisfaction, stress, and productivity (Hogh & Einarsen, 2011). Furthermore, bullying can have a negative impact on employee engagement, which is critical for organisational success. Engaged employees are more likely to be motivated, committed, and productive, leading to better organisational outcomes (Saks, 2006). Workplace bullying is a persistent, harmful behaviour in which individuals face negative actions from one or more coworkers. According to research, it can cause severe psychological distress and interpersonal conflicts, all of which have a negative impact on organisational climate. In addition, bullying has a negative impact on the overall morale and productivity of the victims. According to the literature, workplace bullying lowers employee well-being and job performance (Einarsen et al., 2009).

The impacts of workplace bullying are significant. Research shows that direct victims and bystanders have lower job performance and satisfaction (Hollis & Muir, 2016). Furthermore, high levels of bullying are associated with increased absenteeism and turnover rates, creating a negative cycle that harms overall organisational performance (Kivimäki et al., 2003). Leadership styles, corporate cultures, and support systems are examples of organisational characteristics that can have an impact on job performance. Bass and Riggio (2006) discovered that transformational leadership, which includes providing a clear vision while also assisting and empowering employees, has a positive impact on employee work performance. An optimistic organisational culture that encourages cooperation, knowledge acquisition, and growth improves job performance. Despite similar engagement drivers across organisations, levels of engagement may differ based on demographic and job-related factors (Robinson et al., 2004). In order to achieve organisational goals, organisations from all sectors, whether private or public, should identify factors that can improve employees' work engagement.

Work Engagement

Work engagement has received increased attention due to its significant impact on organisational performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Shuck et al., 2011). The concept emerged 30 years ago when Kahn (1990) published the first paper on “personal engagement” and argued that employees chose to invest themselves entirely in their roles based on their working experiences. Later, Maslach and Leiter (1997) reintroduced the concept of work engagement as an energetic state at work that contrasts with burnout. Engaged employees are perceived to be more energetic and see work as a challenge, as opposed to burnout employees, who are stressed and see work as demanding. Thus, the concept of work engagement gained prominence, resulting in a variety of definitions, concepts, measurements, and engagement theories (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

Work engagement is a psychological state that refers to an individual's enthusiasm, dedication, and involvement in their work. It is a state of mind associated with productive, fulfilling, and enjoyable work. Job performance, on the other hand, refers to an employee's ability to competently perform their job duties and achieve expected results. Employee engagement is defined as an employee's emotional commitment to their organisation, which promotes increased productivity and performance. According to Kanauni et al. (2021), engaged employees are more likely to

contribute positively to workplace dynamics, which can reduce instances of bullying. Engagement is critical not only for individual satisfaction but also for the overall success of an organisation, especially in the public sector, where resources are often scarce (Kahn, 1990). Employees who are engaged are more likely to be motivated, productive, and innovative, resulting in higher job performance (Saks et al., 2022). Organisations can increase employee engagement by creating a supportive work environment, offering opportunities for development and growth, and recognising and rewarding employees' contributions.

Work engagement as a concept is critical in the public sector. Increased engagement and productivity among public servants are critical because government agencies are at the forefront of responding to many crises (World, 2020). Although many studies on work engagement have been published on its antecedents and the benefits it brings to organisations, only a few studies have been conducted in the public sector context, and the literature on work engagement in the public sector remains limited (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2013). Employees in the public sector have stronger correlations with work engagement and other job-related attitudes than those in the private sector (Borst et al., 2019). As a result, there is a strong need to close these gaps in order to gain a better understanding of work engagement in the public sector. A comprehensive assessment of the factors influencing work engagement will contribute to the understanding of work engagement research. To gain a better understanding of work engagement within government organisations, researchers and practitioners must identify more work engagement antecedents at work.

According to research, engaged employees are more proactive, committed, and dedicated; they work hard to achieve organisational goals. Schaufeli et al. (2002) described an engaged employee as possessing a positive, fulfilled work-related mindset characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Studies have shown that these employees are more proactive, committed, and dedicated than their less engaged or disengaged colleagues. In 2005, Zapf and Einarsen investigated the relationship between workplace bullying and employee engagement. Their findings revealed a negative relationship between workplace bullying and work engagement, indicating that bullied employees were less engaged in their jobs. Salmivalli, Voeten, and Poskiparta (2011) investigated workplace bullying in a school setting and discovered a negative correlation between bullying intensity and instructors' level of work engagement. They emphasised the importance of fighting workplace bullying to foster a positive working environment.

Work Performance

Job performance is an aggregate of employee behaviours that have some expected value to organisations (positive or negative). These behaviours can be classified into three broad classes: task performance, contextual performance, and counterproductivity. It is now widely accepted that job performance is a multidimensional construct (Sackett & Lievens, 2008). The most commonly studied dimensions include task performance, citizenship performance, adaptive performance, and counterproductive work behaviours. Task performance refers to the technical proficiency part of job performance (Borman et al., 2010). Task performance is usually measured by asking supervisors to rate their subordinates on various behaviours relevant to the job. Several rating formats are available, including Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scales (Smith & Kendall, 1963), Behavior Summary Scales (Borman, 1979), Behavior Observation Scales (Latham & Wexley, 1981), and Computer Adaptive Rating Scales (Borman et al., 2001). In addition to task performance, employees engage in activities that support the broader work environment. These activities constitute the contextual or citizenship performance domain (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Citizenship performance can be measured using supervisor ratings; however, peer and self-ratings are also commonly used, with some authors (e.g., Allen et al., 2000) suggesting that peers are the best source for the ratings.

Motowidlo (2003) defines job performance as the total expected value for the organisation of an individual's discrete behavioural episodes over a given time period. These researchers highlight two key issues in this definition. First, performance is the cumulative effect of several discrete behaviours over time. Second, performance refers to a behaviour's expected value for the organisation. Awadh and Wan Ismail (2012) defined job performance as an employee's involvement in achieving organisational goals. Researchers have studied job performance as an important dependent variable for over a decade. Recent research indicates that leaders' personality traits influence job performance. The theory characterises job performance as a multidimensional construct comprising task and contextual dimensions (Bhatti et al., 2014). Motowidlo, Borman, and Schmit (1997) define job performance as the overall predictable value of employees' behaviours over a given period. Employees' job performance has an impact on organisational outcomes. Job performance also ensures that the organisation runs smoothly; it consists of knowledge and skills that can guide employees through various tasks.

Employee job performance is one of the most important factors in achieving an organisation's goals, and most organisations should prioritise it. Mahmood (2008) has studied job performance in the work context, examining attitudes towards job performance, job satisfaction, and commitment to task completion. Baillien et al. (2011) examined the relationship between workplace harassment and job performance among Swedish and Belgian employees. The authors discovered a significant inverse correlation, implying that workplace bullying harms job performance. In addition, Nielsen et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of workplace bullying and its consequences. Researchers discovered a significant inverse relationship between workplace bullying and job performance, providing additional evidence of the negative impact of bullying on employee performance. Tehseen et al. (2017) investigated the correlation between workplace harassment and job performance among Malaysian police officers. Their findings show that workplace bullying has a negative impact on job performance, emphasising the importance of implementing preventive measures and creating supportive work environments. These studies show that workplace bullying consistently reduces work engagement and job performance across industries and nations. They emphasise the importance of addressing workplace bullying to create a positive work environment that promotes employees' well-being and performance.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative correlational research design to look into the relationship between workplace bullying, employee engagement, and job performance among Sarawak Public Works Department support staff members. Among the quantitative study strengths relevant to this research are:

1. **Objectivity:** This study prioritises objectivity by using statistical methods for data analysis. This reduces bias and leads to more reliable results.
2. **Generalisability:** A larger population can apply the study's findings.
3. **Precision:** Quantitative studies can accurately measure variables and identify relationships between them, as demonstrated in this study.
4. **Statistical Analysis:** This study uses SPSS and Pearson correlation techniques for systematic data analysis.
5. **Clear results:** Quantitative research typically presents Pearson correlation analysis in a clear and concise manner, making the results easier to understand.
6. **Time efficiency:** You can quickly collect and analyse quantitative data using technology.

A structured questionnaire was created to collect information about participants' demographics, workplace bullying experiences, engagement levels, and perceived job performance. The questionnaire used validated scales to ensure reliability and validity. The self-administered questionnaire was distributed electronically to a sample of 2,000 support group employees, yielding 504 responses from male (246) and female (258) participants.

SPSS version 29.0 was used to analyse the data and find correlations between the variables of interest. This study used Pearson correlation analysis to determine the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two continuous variables. The primary goal of Pearson correlation analysis is to determine how closely two variables relate. It assists in determining whether an increase in one variable results in an increase or decrease in another variable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Profile of Respondents

The respondents' profile reveals a sample comprising individuals aged 31-40 (44%), with a relatively even gender distribution (51.2% female, 48.8% male). Most respondents (70%) belong to Support Group 1, and their educational attainment is primarily at the Diploma level (50%), with a significant proportion holding MCE/SPM qualifications (34.1%). Most respondents have been in service for 1-5 years (29.2%), indicating a mix of experience levels within the sample.

Table 1: *Respondents' Profile*

Variables	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	258	51.2
	Male	246	48.8
Age	51 to 60 years	80	15.9
	41 to 50 years	108	21.4
	31 to 40 years	222	44
	21 to 30 years	93	18.5
Service Group	Support Group 1	353	70
	Support Group 2	151	30
Grade	38	13	2.6
	36	45	8.9
	32	6	1.2
	29	177	35.1
	26	17	3.4
	22	96	19
	19	150	29.8

Highest Education	Master's Degree	5	1
	Degree	32	63
	Diploma	252	50
	MCE/SPM	172	34.1
	Others	42	8.3
Length of Service	More than 21 years	104	20.6
	16 to 20 years	69	13.7
	11 to 15 years	75	14.9
	6 to 10 years	109	21.6
	1 to 5 years	147	29.2

FINDINGS

The analytical results revealed a significant prevalence of workplace bullying within the organisation, with negative correlations between workplace bullying and employee engagement ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.01$) and job performance ($r = -0.132$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that higher levels of bullying correlate with lower levels of engagement and performance.

Table 2: *Pearson Correlation Analysis*

Variable:	(1)	(2)	(3)
1) Workforce Bullying	(0.942)		
2) Job Engagement	-.495**	(0.953)	
3) Job Performance	-.132**	.456**	(0.952)

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, 95% CI

Pearson correlations (above diagonal) and consistency values: Cronbach Alpha (on diagonal)

DISCUSSIONS

The findings revealed a negative correlation coefficient, implying that "workforce bullying", "engagement", and "performance" have an inverse relationship. The findings revealed that higher levels of bullying were associated with lower levels of engagement and performance. This finding is consistent with previous research (Einarsen et al., 2009), which emphasised the prevalence of workplace bullying across various organisational settings. Furthermore, this finding is consistent with the research of Hogh and Einarsen (2011), who found that bullying can lead to decreased job satisfaction, increased stress, and reduced organisational commitment.

According to this finding, workplace bullying has a significant negative impact on individual employees and the organisation. The negative relationship between

bullying and engagement suggests that a hostile work environment can harm employees' psychological well-being, resulting in decreased motivation, job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions. Furthermore, the negative correlation between bullying and performance underscores economic costs. Bullied employees may face a decline in productivity, creativity, and overall job performance. This can have a significant impact on organisational efficiency and profitability. To address these issues, organisations must implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies, offer training and awareness programs, and foster a positive organisational culture. Organisations can improve employee well-being, job satisfaction, and overall organisational performance by taking proactive steps to prevent and address bullying.

Furthermore, there is much evidence that workplace bullying hurts employee performance. Escartín et al. (2013) studied how workplace bullying affects job performance in Spain's public sector. The study found a significant and negative relationship between the two variables. The consequences of workplace bullying are significant. According to research, both direct victims and bystanders have lower job performance and satisfaction (Hollis & Muir, 2016). Furthermore, high levels of bullying are associated with increased absenteeism and turnover rates, creating a negative cycle that harms overall organisational performance (Kivimäki et al., 2003). Leadership styles, corporate cultures, and support systems are examples of organisational characteristics that can impact job performance.

The study's findings revealed a high prevalence of workplace bullying among Sarawak Public Works Department employees. This finding is consistent with previous research, which shows the prevalence of bullying in various organisational settings. Furthermore, the study discovered a significant negative relationship between workplace bullying and employee engagement. This suggests that a hostile environment can harm employees' psychological well-being, resulting in lower motivation, job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions. Furthermore, the study found a negative relationship between workplace bullying and employee performance. This finding suggests that bullying can reduce productivity, creativity, and overall job performance. These findings highlight the critical need for organisations to implement effective strategies for preventing and addressing workplace bullying. Organisations can improve employees' well-being, job satisfaction, and overall performance by taking proactive steps to create a positive and supportive work environment.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the prevalence and impact of workplace bullying among Sarawak Public Works Department employees. The findings revealed a high prevalence of bullying, which had negative consequences for both individual employees and the organisation. The finding of this study revealed a negative correlation between workplace bullying and employee engagement, suggesting that a hostile work environment can negatively impact employee well-being and job satisfaction. Furthermore, the study found a negative relationship between bullying and employee performance, implying that it can reduce productivity and organisational effectiveness. This finding is consistent with previous research, which has shown that workplace bullying has a negative impact on both individual and organisational outcomes. The findings of this study emphasise the importance of addressing workplace bullying in order to foster a positive and productive working environment.

To reduce the adverse effects of workplace bullying, the Sarawak Public Works Department should implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies (Einarsen et al., 2009), provide training and awareness programs (Hogh et al., 2011), establish effective reporting mechanisms (WBPA, 2023); promote a positive organisational culture (Saks, 2006); provide counselling and support services (Einarsen et al., 2009); and conduct regular surveys and assessments (WPBA, 2023). The organisation can improve employee well-being, job satisfaction, and overall organisational performance by taking proactive steps to prevent and address bullying. Future research could look at the long-term effects of workplace bullying, the efficacy of various intervention strategies, and the role of organisational culture in shaping workplace bullying behaviour.

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Author contributions

The principal author conceptualised and designed the study, created and administered the research questionnaire, gathered and managed the research data, and wrote the preliminary manuscript. 1st Co-author edited the manuscript and provided valuable guidance on the research design and methodology. She also contributed to the literature review and theoretical framework, assisted with data analysis and result interpretation, and reviewed and provided critical feedback on the manuscript. 2nd co-author provided expert statistical advice and interpretation, contributed to the manuscript's discussion and implications section, and reviewed and offered critical feedback.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest associated with this publication.

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